

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Statement of Garrett De Bell, Executive Director
The Yosemite Guardian - A project of Earth Island Institute
Presented to the
Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands
Committee on Resources
Oversight hearing on The National Park Service
plans for the restoration of Yosemite National Park
22 March 1997

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this oversight hearing on the very important topic of the restoration of Yosemite.

My name is Garrett De Bell and I am Executive Director of the Yosemite Guardian, a project of Earth Island Institute.

Introduction: Yosemite Guardian works to protect Yosemite AND to achieve fair and considerate treatment for visitors and area residents. We work to ensure the continued existence of Yosemite's magnificent forests and meadows with their biodiversity intact. The environmental issues that concern us most include the need for an adequate control burn program to protect and restore the mid-elevation forests and the need for a research and restoration effort sufficient to understand and reverse the alarming disappearance of frogs from the wilderness of Yosemite. We bring up these issues today in the context that these important needs continue to be ignored while issues in the developed area of Yosemite Valley and its fabled, but exaggerated, gridlock receive the lion's share of attention and money when simpler measures could manage the problem. We vigorously support the right of access to the Park by visitors without unnecessary restrictions.

We advocate a completely open decision making process which allows the people a voice in the decisions that effect them.

We are heartened by this hearing today, as we recognize a need to increase Congressional oversight of NPS plans and actions as well as to increase the level of informed public involvement. We are working to ensure that both these avenues of "quality control" stay open.

Our views, information resources, and new programs to help citizens become better informed and more powerful supporters of Yosemite can be found on our web site at <http://members.aol.com/YosemiteOL/>

The fresh attention to Yosemite and possibility of more money, following on the tail of the new infusion of money from increased entrance fees, the new concession contract, and the continued success of Yosemite Fund efforts, makes it very important that we see the money is spent in ways that best achieve the NPS mandate of preserving Yosemite for all time while providing for its use and enjoyment by present and future generations.

\$178 or \$200million is a lot of money - even more could and should be spent to bring Yosemite up to the

excellence it should have, in infrastructure, facilities, guest services, and most important environmental protection. But it is important that it be spent wisely. It is also important that restrictive measures that unnecessarily restrict visitation and harm the surrounding communities are not implemented casually. The details of the NPS's request have not been made public, so we cannot comment on the details - and this is an issue.

Without access to reliable and official NPS cost estimates, I will concentrate on a few of the major items that seem to be "on the table" currently, but first I will briefly summarize my background and set forth some overall concerns.

Background: I am a biologist with primary interests and concerns in the ecology of plant and animal communities. My training was at Stanford and U.C., Berkeley. I have been privileged to work with some of the great ecologists including Starker Leopold whose work still is the foundation of much NPS wildlife and wildland policy. I have a home near Yosemite part of which is rented on a nightly basis to Yosemite visitors - perhaps the smallest rental unit in the area.

I have been in love with Yosemite from childhood. I hiked the High Sierra Loop many times in my early teens and hiked from Mt. Whitney to Yosemite Valley on the John Muir Trail by myself when I was sixteen. I have climbed many of the walls and peaks of Yosemite, skied the trails, and kayaked the rivers. My wife and I were married in a snowstorm on Henness Ridge overlooking the Merced River and its South Fork.

After finishing graduate school at U.C. Berkeley, my first major work was with David Brower, who asked me to put together The Environmental Handbook, which was the unofficial handbook for the first Earth Day. The NPS bought many copies to help their managers to better understand increasingly complex environmental issues -and they have grown much more complex since then.

As an environmental consultant for the Curry Company, I was privileged to be able to play a key role in many lasting environmental projects in Yosemite. Some of these were the establishment of a comprehensive recycling and beverage container deposit program, elimination of CFC containing products from the Park, ensuring protection for the Merced River in the Wild and Scenic River System, removing many obsolete structures, and writing the environmental assessments for major projects including the removal of the sewer plant from the west end of Yosemite Valley.

Concern with the rush to implement Reservations and other restrictions on use:

We are alarmed at the rapid push by the NPS to implement a Day Use Reservations System without public hearings or input as well as the rush to go forward with other newly proposed major changes in Yosemite Valley. While the GMP authorizes many of the actions, many others are treading new ground and require public review and NEPA compliance. We are including here the closing of the Rivers Campground which is not called for in the 1980 GMP, and the proposed Taft Toe parking area and the related elimination of the excellent one way loop road that was one of the major accomplishments of the recent past. But the rush for reservations seems particularly misplaced. We realize these projects are intended to help reduce Yosemite's automobile congestion. We know they are well-intentioned, but nevertheless we feel they will be counterproductive.

What is the need for a day use reservations system, in normal times or in this year of "highwater"? In spite of the rhetoric about Yosemite "having reached its saturation point" etc, the fact is that even Yosemite Valley is rarely "full" as defined by the NPS car counts and the capacities set by the NPS after a

comprehensive planning process. In fact the Valley should never be full unless the NPS goofs, because the Day Use Traffic Management Plan cuts off access in the rare event that the Valley capacity is approached - only a few days at most a year.

Perhaps there is a temporary need for reservations this year, due to the flood, but this is not obvious. One would assume that visitation will be down due to the publicity and the closure of some campgrounds and many overnight units - eliminating all those cars from the roads, trail heads, and parking lots.

The ability to accommodate these day users wouldn't seem to be a problem. The problem with the broken sewer is fixed, the wells work - at least on manual control. There should be plenty of parking for the reduced number of visitors,

What is the problem that requires the reservations system? The justification from the Park has been very sketchy and it sounds like another "closure for the convenience of the government", a trend that has been growing over the past decade which has seen many closures, such as when the government shut down. But there is a rash of less extensive closures -closing the Glacier Point road to Badger pass until the ski area is declared open - denying people the right to hike or ski on the trails in early and late season, and the closure of the river to kayakers below El Cap Bridge for no apparent reason, and the closure of campgrounds along the Merced River.

But if there are reasons the NPS should tell people what they are and formulate their policy publicly and work with the stakeholders, with all concerned constituencies, to minimize the unintentional harm done by a poorly conceived system. The goal and result of public involvement is better policy. Yes it takes time, but it is fundamental to a free society.

The hasty imposition of a reservation system is certain to harm the surrounding communities which provide accommodations and other services outside the boundaries as called for by the NPS and its visionary GMP. These communities should be viewed as partners by the Park and included in the planning. It is necessary to remind the Park of its own GMP which states on p. 10 the goal of "encouragement of private enterprise outside the Park" as a key element in providing accommodations outside, rather than inside, Yosemite's boundaries.

Any reservation system should be imposed only if there truly is a need and the system should be designed to be minimally harmful to visitors and the region. There are options that could make the system less burdensome on visitors and the community - we shouldn't make visitors regiment their Yosemite experience unless it is really necessary and simpler and less restrictive measures have been tried and failed.

Is the system mandatory or voluntary? A voluntary system - to assure a visitor of entrance even if capacity is reached - might be no big problem. But if a reservation is required in order to enter the Park, whether it is full or not, then the system will be very harmful, and unnecessarily so, to visitors and the community. Popular restaurants admit guests without reservations whenever they are not "full". You are never "required" to have a reservation.

What is the number of Cars and busses allowed? A reservations system should not be used to arbitrarily lower the number of vehicles allowed without a public process.

What will the fee be? Will it be in addition to the entrance fee, which has just been quadrupled, or part of it? Will the fee be charged to all, or just those who want guaranteed admittance. Will a visitor staying in the

nearby communities need a day use permit for each day, or one for the entire visit? Will the hotels in the gateway communities be able to issue reservations - acting as agents for the reservations system?

What provisions will be made for those who do not have credit cards to purchase a reservation by phone, or who don't speak English? Will there be options such as pay at the entrance if reservations are available? If not why not?

Alternatives: There are alternative ways to reduce crowding and automobile use without the high cost and regimentation of the proposed reservation system and proposed changes in the Valley. A real and important long term need is to reduce the number of cars driving to Yosemite, but we think this should be done by providing quality and voluntary alternatives that people will use. The free or low fare shuttle proposed by local businesses, on a funding model similar to the successful Valley Shuttles and Badger Shuttle (which are funded by add-ons to various fees such as lift tickets) could let many visitors leave their cars in Mariposa, Fish Camp, Buck Meadows or other logical points on the 3 highways. By taking the shuttle instead of cars everyone wins.

Reducing or eliminating completely the counterproductive \$10/passenger entrance fee for bus passengers seems essential to the goal of encouraging use of public transit.

Incentives and disincentives used elsewhere to smooth peaks in use should be tried - develop a tiered fee structure with higher peak day fees and lower off-peak along with a carpool incentive to waive the fee for carpools of 4 or more occupants. This will create a powerful, but voluntary, incentive for people to carpool for day trips - particularly on peak days.

Provide a free shuttle or free passage on regional transit for commuting employees, saving them money while getting their cars off the road.

Improve the existing information system to provide consistently accurate information on park access regarding capacity, closures, etc, so people can plan their visits knowing if the Park is "full" or not. It usually is not.

And implement common sense measures to eliminate the 7 or so bottlenecks where most of the "gridlock" occurs - the 3 western entrances and 4 key intersections in the Valley. Adequate staffing of entrance stations and someone directing traffic would do a world of good. The media frequently prints the sensational photographs of the long lines at the entrance station on holidays like Memorial Day - not telling the whole story that it is just a bottleneck that could be easily opened.

Valley transpiration issues:

We believe that the major transportation need in Yosemite is to encourage more people to voluntarily leave their car and take busses or shuttles - and Yosemite benefits most from the visitor who takes public transportation all the way to Yosemite from home - Amtrak to Merced and then the bus to Yosemite. Leaving a car in the Gateway communities to take a shuttle is highly advantageous as well - in terms of air pollution and energy use as well as the congestion, parking, and "gridlock" issues. We understand that the concept of a parking area at Taft Toe at the west end of Yosemite Valley is about to surface again as the restoration effort and the interrelated Valley Implementation plan goes forward. Compared to the benefits of the shuttles from the gateways and beyond, we see no benefit to this proposal which would have people drive all the way to the West End of Yosemite Valley only to be forced to transfer to a shuttle for the last

three miles of their trip. The costs and inconvenience will be huge, the environmental impact large, and the benefits small and largely symbolic.

Ecological issues:

We concentrate so much on the transportation issues in part because they divert attention from the ecological threats which we think need more attention if Yosemite is ever to be truly protected. If the transportation issues could be dealt with in the most common sense and cost effective manner then there would be money left over to restore Yosemite's forests.

We have an ongoing concern that the major ecological threats to Yosemite's forests, meadows, and wildlife get short shrift as attention always focuses on the real but very infrequent "gridlock in Yosemite Valley". As the flood recovery goes forward we are seeing clear indications that the NPS wants to implement actions that will make it more difficult or expensive to visit Yosemite - with no clear reason.

We hope the Congress and the Park will look at the big picture of the need to protect and restore Yosemite, all of it, not just the developed areas. And the costs for some of the major programs needed to protect and restore the wilderness are minor compared to many of the items on the table because of the flood, or soon to be on the table as the VIP or Valley Implementation plan finally goes public.

Let me take one very important specific. The mid-elevation forests of Yosemite have been put at risk by well-intentioned, but misguided management actions, just as the floodplains should not have had employee tent housing, the forests should not have been protected from fire for 50 years. The tragic result of this overprotection has set the stage for ecological and human disaster.

In 1990 Yosemite saw the disastrous Steamboat and Arch Rock Fires which burned from highway 140 to Badger Pass on the South and almost to Crane Flat, consuming most of Foresta on the way on the North side. The stage is set and gets worse each year in the remaining forests midelevation forests. The NPS understands these issues very well, and is very competent at conducting the controlled burns to restore the forests, but the money or the will isn't there to treat the acres that need it.

While the focus today is on spending money to do the right thing in the flood plain and damaged infrastructure, and we support that, we also believe this is the time to widen the focus to correct the dangerous and environmentally harmful impacts in the forests. Either more money should be appropriated or at least an oversight process set that ensures that any funds left over after the flood damage and restoration is complete goes to the highest priority items.

The need is to burn a total of about 140,000 acres on a ten year rotating cycle or 14,000 acres per year. At a cost of about \$100/acre to prepare and management the burn - costs which decline as the forest is restored and becomes less of a 'dog hair thicket' ready to explode - we are looking at \$1,400,000 per year, maybe more, maybe less- but the number is probably as good as many in the damage assessments.

Compare this to the costs in the NPS housing plan to move each employee from the Valley where they work now to El Portal of over \$300,000 per employee including moving offices and duplicating infrastructure, As we implement money to restore Yosemite we need to ask questions about how best to spend the money. If a tent village such as the Terrace or Boystown were improved and retained, the savings over building upscale dorms, whether in the valley or El portal, would be enough to fund unmet environmental needs.

Summary and concern with oversight:

In summary we hope these hearings will lead to increased ongoing oversight by the committee, as was common years ago when staffers Dale Crane and Clay Peters made frequent visits and kept in touch by phone in between. It is only through democratic give and take and oversight by Congress and citizens that government can do its best. Yosemite needs vigorous and well informed discussion to ensure that the best and fairest decisions are made with full public involvement.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment.

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